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The process of making an Integration Strategy for Refugees in Hungary

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1. Asylum and Integration Policies in Hungary before and after accession to the EU.

The Hungarian legislation on asylum developed significantly in the period leading up to the accession to the European Union in 2004. Since asylum legislation is a part of the “acquis communautaire”, the country was obliged to invest in setting up transparent asylum procedures and to provide to the asylum seekers the necessary facilities during the assessment of their claim, as well as the necessary legal guarantees during the procedure. Whereas this task was completed, the other important aspect of any refugee policy, namely integration, was not addressed in a comprehensive way.

Today, the main components of a Hungarian integration effort consist of a range of social benefits aiming at assisting the refugee to be self sufficient. Moreover, some language training is provided; and, finally, the refugee has the right to remain in the reception center for a period of time that can extend to more than a year - in some cases even longer, if he is unable to find suitable accommodation by himself.

For some years now, the Hungarian administration has realized that these actions do not satisfactorily address the needs of the refugees, and that further steps are needed, in order to develop an integration policy vis a vis the development that has taken place in other member states of the European Union. For this reason, several attempts were made to correct this situation. One of the selected methods was to utilize EU funds and to set up international projects with experts from other member states. However, the recommendations provided in the framework of these projects have never been implemented nor been given a proper follow-up.

One of the main reasons of the failure of those former efforts was the lack of any direct “ownership” by the Hungarian stakeholders. More often than not, those projects did not assess the Hungarian administrative reality and practice but provided merely one-way expert advice and export of the respective national systems from where the experts originated.

The Greek-Hungarian Twinning project, launched in August 2005 and funded by the European Commission, was another attempt from the Hungarian side to readdress and correct some of the pending issues on integration.¹ The main component of the project was the creation of a White Paper that could provide the Hungarian government with a solid foundation for developing an integration strategy and implementing various specific actions.

2. The process

In order to avoid that the White Paper would suffer a similar fate as the previous projects, the main aim was to involve as many national stakeholders as possible, in order to secure a Hungarian “ownership” to the strategy. However, at the same time, it was important that the participating Hungarian authorities, NGOs etc, would produce a useful result. To ensure this outcome, it was necessary for the external experts, who were working on the project, to re-determine their role, from providing only expert advice, to becoming the facilitators to the process. Thus, the main focus of the experts became more to provide topics for discussion, present the issues systematically and ensure that the main problems were addressed by the Hungarian participants.

For this purpose, a horizontal working group was established, with the task to provide the general framework, guidelines and basic principles for an integration strategy. It was very crucial to the process that this working group would be small in size and consist of members representing both the authorities and non-governmental agencies. Furthermore, it was important that the key persons in the group would be able to disassociate themselves from the constraints of the authorities they represented and provide ideas for the general philosophy and framework of an integration strategy.

Simultaneously, four technical working groups were established, consisting of experts from various fields. Their task was to make concrete proposals and recommendations in their area of expertise. The four areas chosen were: social assistance and labor, education (including language tuition), society awareness and a general legal review of the existing legislation.

Before starting the process of writing the White Paper, it was considered useful to analyze the current situation in Hungary, in order to identify the opportunities and limitations that had to be taken into consideration.

The main conclusions of this exercise were as follows:

- a) The number of refugees and persons with a complementary status in Hungary is very small.

¹ The HU2004/IB/JH Transition Facility Project “Facilitating Refugee Integration in Hungary”

- b) More information would be needed, if the target group was enlarged in order to include not only refugees and persons with subsidiary protection, but also other third country nationals.
- c) As a result of the exiguity of the presence of aliens in the country, there is no major political and social demand for policies and action on immigration and, consequently, on integration of migrants – even less so on refugees.
- d) Hungary has undertaken a political and economic reform program in order to address its high budget deficit, which entails that public spending must be decreased over the following years.
- e) The authorities dealing with integration at the moment, the responsible Ministry and the NGO society, were all keen to move forward and it is this momentum that the White Paper process should try to explore and take advantage of.
- f) A restructuring of the administration in the summer of 2006 presented some new opportunities since competence on the area of migration was moved from the Ministry of Interior to the Ministry of Justice and Law Enforcement and an Immigration department was established in order to deal with this matter, something that did not exist under the former structure.

3. The content of the White Paper

Taking the above facts into consideration, the horizontal working group was given the task to provide detailed answers to four major questions on integration: what, why, who and how.

What?

Under the first question “What is integration?” the working group was expected to establish a tailor made definition on integration for Hungary and provide the basic principles and objectives of the integration strategy. This proved to be a relatively easy task and in the first meeting a consensus was formed, that the definition should follow the established European guidelines.² Integration in Hungary should be a two-way process based on mutual respect. It should be entirely voluntary for the refugee to accept integration measures and the main objectives should be to facilitate access to the labor market, address social inequality and combat discrimination.

Why?

The working group was asked then to justify the need for an integration strategy in Hungary. It was considered important, that if the White Paper should evolve

² Several Community documents have provided within the last years definitions on integration. Among them, the European Commission’s Communication on “Immigration, integration and employment”, COM (2003) 336 and COM (2005) 389, can be mentioned.

into a national strategy, the decision makers should be provided with valid grounds for making such a step, since it inevitably would include increased expenses in this sector.

In the case of Hungary the answer to this second question, was that, first of all, the present situation might change rapidly. Hungary, as a member of the European Union and a country with an external border, has many probabilities to start receiving within the following years a larger number of third-country nationals seeking employment, better life conditions or protection. It is, therefore, important that Hungary prepares itself legally and socially for such an eventuality.

Secondly, Hungary as a modern developed democracy and a member of the European Union, has subscribed to making its society more inclusive for all, especially to those more vulnerable, and to provide them with effective access to the rights they are entitled to.

Thirdly, although the country has not faced serious social unrest – at least not insofar as migrants and refugees are concerned – the possible increase of marginalised groups, especially in the urban centres, creates the risk of added social exclusion, which should be expected and avoided.

Finally, actions on integration today present an economic advantage, since the successful integration of third-country nationals in the society can contribute to the Hungarian economy and its welfare rather than being a drain on the public funds.

Who?

This question has two components. First, it is important that the target group of an integration strategy is determined; on the other side, the authorities that are responsible to coordinate, supervise and implement an integration strategy, should be determined.

The mandate of the project was to provide solutions for the integration of recognized refugees and persons under other kind of international protection. As mentioned above, in Hungary this group is very small. So, in order for the integration strategy to have an impact, it was considered important to enlarge the target group, in order to include other groups of third country nationals. However, it was outside the scope of the project to investigate and use information, in order to set up specific integration targets on those other groups of third country nationals or propose services for them, just as it was not possible to single out which forms of residence status should be included. On the other hand, the working group agreed that the main principles of integration as well as the main responsible authorities and the larger framework of integration should be the same, no matter who would finally be included in the target group.

As for the second part of the question -that of the responsible authorities-, the working group considered that, given the significance of political guidance and monitoring for such a novel policy, the more appropriate solution would be a single administrative unit, such as a separate Department within the Ministry of Justice and Law Enforcement or the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.³

The actual implementation should, however, be achieved at other levels and by other actors. In this respect, given the fact that the regional level is not yet developed whereas local administration has already a substantial number of competencies, it was suggested that integration should be mainly implemented at the local level by the municipal authorities. The final decision on the level chosen should depend on the following premises:

- The level of interest expressed by the representative organs of each level.
- The already existing infrastructure and the experience in dealing with refugees, and possibly also migrants.
- Target group density, both in the respective region/municipality and in the whole country.
- Proximity and familiarity of each level.
- Organisational capacities.

How?

The legal basis of integration in Hungary was until today included in the asylum law. In its conclusions, the working group suggested, that the creation of a separate framework law, as known from other European member states, would increase the impact. This would also be in line with the Hungarian legal tradition, and it would ensure that all relevant secondary legislation would have a single instrument as its source.

Secondly, the main principle of conducting integration in Hungary should be via mainstreaming. However, it was realized that any mainstreaming process takes time and that it will take years to include the relevant polices and/or change legislation throughout the different fields of integration (labor-, education-, health- and social policies etc), to ensure that refugees and other third country nationals will receive the services they are entitled to. For this reason, specific integration programs for refugees should be established to supplement the mainstream. One of the concrete proposals was to establish a mentor program, where a professional trained person would assist the refugee in getting access to the available services.

Finally, the funding and the sources available also fall under this question of “how”. In this respect, it was suggested that all integration activities were collected in a single budget line under the responsible Ministry, in order to make the expenses for integration transparent and coherent. It was stressed that

³ This is also in line with the recommendations of various European texts, which advocate that a single central body has the overall strategic responsibility, see e.g. COM (2003) 336.

integration is a state obligation, so that state funding for the permanent features of the integration strategy should principally be borne by the state budget. In addition to national funding, European funds should also be used to finance new project and implement pilot projects in line with specific target established annually.

4. Conclusion

Answering the above four basic questions - what, why, who and how - provided the necessary components for the foundation of a coherent future integration policy in Hungary.

The process of writing this policy document also revealed how important it was, that it was controlled by Hungarian stakeholders and that there were representatives from all interest groups. It is hoped, that the project, in the framework of which the White Paper was created, will have a sustainable effect on the future choices of the Hungarian administration. For sure, a momentum and an interest in integration has been created during the implementation of the project, and it is now up to Hungary to turn theory into practice and improve the integration of its refugees and third country nationals for the benefit of both partners.

Center for International Relations

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